

Getting Along With Others In The Research Career: A Note To The Biomedical Research Student

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Abstract: - A career in the biomedical research path deserves a long-term commitment that centers around building rapport with the people who make substantial contributions to your professional growth and success. Succeeding as a research student requires effective collaboration with others. Your thesis supervisor, the post-doctoral fellow in your group, colleague students in the lab, the lab technician, the research assistant, the IT expert, the administrative secretary, the library staff, etc, are all very vital to the progress of your research training than you might envisage. There is therefore the need to be abreast with how to build and maintain good relations with such key people who matter in your training and beyond. This paper outlines the importance of these colleagues, how to establish good working relations with them regardless of your diversities, how to live with the people with whom you do not have a natural fit, and how to manage the difficult times in life as a research student. Creating a well nurtured, coordinated and managed relationship with your colleague scientists will go a long way to make life as a research student much easier for you.

Index Terms: - Getting along, research, career, student, biomedical, supervisor, laboratory

1 INTRODUCTION

So you want to be a research scientist? Great choice! The field of biomedical research is dynamic, challenging, exciting and very rewarding [1]. A career in this path deserves a long-term commitment that centers around building rapport with the people who make substantial contributions to your professional growth and success. Unfortunately, several students are introduced into the research world without being provided with the science and art of people management, lab management and even career management. After your research training (your PhD and possibly a post-doctoral fellowship), you may want to establish your own research group. In this position, you shall assume a managerial role taking responsibility for all members of your group. For this reason, poor people management skills can have detrimental effects on your ability to succeed in this regard. As a student researcher, there is therefore the need to be abreast with how to build and maintain good relations with the key people who matter in your training and beyond. Such people make several meaningful impacts on your success. This paper identifies who these key people are, outlines how to establish good working relationships with them, accepting their diversities, adapting to the new environment, the means to handle the "difficult" ones, and dealing with the daily ups and downs in the research life.

2 ACCEPT DIVERSITY AS PART OF LIFE

Your career progression within the biomedical career will certainly not be in isolation: you will definitely be in contact with others. You will associate yourself, willingly or unwillingly, with other people including your supervisors, post-docs, coursemates, lab mates, roommates, friends, technical and administrative staff. These are people of diverse social, intellectual, economic, religious, and educational backgrounds. Each of them has got a distinct personality, temperament, behavior, lifestyle, interest, and experiences that vary from yours [2]. Yet you should be at peace with them all. Welcome to the world of diversity! Accept that no one else is like you and no one will ever be. Other people are unique just as you feel so special. You did not grow up in one house, and you were exposed to different preferences and treatments. You are thus likely to disagree in several aspects of life. This is the diversity that makes the world interesting. One importance of continuing your education is to meet new people, experience new cultures and lifestyles, and to be better adapted to living in this diverse world [2]. Meeting new people presents us with both opportunities and challenges [2]. You are all connected within the nucleus of your research community, and as such affected by the decisions and even the existence of those around you. It is not difficult getting along with others once you build a community of mutual respect [2]. To build a community where everyone is respected, you should learn to understand each other [2]. You should therefore build useful coexistence with your lab mates and others, whilst accepting their differences, in order to enhance your career growth [2].

3 ADAPT TO THE NEW ENVIRONMENT

In the same way as all living creatures have to adapt to their environments in order to survive, you need to adapt yourself to the new research environment. To do so, appreciate and accord others the respect you expect them to reciprocate. To adapt to the "new" people, fraternise with them, and to adapt to situations, act on them. However, you should be careful not to form presumptive opinions about people based on their race, appearances, dressing, religion, or culture [2]. Not even by their positions or ranks. Never think that some people are less important. You shall realise, sooner or later, that all people

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are very important to your success.

3.1 Getting along with your supervisors/advisors

One vital resource that is often overlooked in the research training process is the supervisor/advisor [2]. Many at times, students are expected to naturally get along with such superiors. But the truth is, as a research student, the way you keep in touch with your supervisor is very different from how you used to be directed by your professors in the classroom. For this reason, we shall discuss your supervisors' expectations from you, how to relate with them, and how to carry yourself during an encounter with them.

3.1.2 The need to get along with your supervisor

It is worthy of note that your supervisor is there to see to your success, although their titles and achievements may sometimes appear intimidating [2]. The primary role of a supervisor is to assist you progress in your research journey [3]. This professor will have a great impact on your training and professional development. Most tertiary institutions have clear guidance on the expected responsibilities and functions of a supervisor [3]. You may consult this document from your institution for further details. The following are some of the basic requirements of a supervisor, as spelt out in the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Programmes;

- i. A supervisor should possess recognised expertise in the field of research;
- ii. A supervisor should possess the necessary skills and experience to monitor, support and direct the work of research students;
- iii. The support and direction provided by the supervisor should be sufficient to enable the supervisees succeed in their research training;
- iv. The supervisor should consistently monitor the students' progress and provide feedback regularly [4].

Your supervisor is a critical friend of yours: a mate and colleague that you must get on with. The way you interact with, and show respect and understanding to, your professor has a potential marked effect on your success. Getting along well with supervisors comes with a number of opportunities. Undoubtedly, their involvement, assistance and direction in your research work will facilitate its progression and completion [3]. Moreover, your professor may have information about useful career development opportunities such as; research conferences, graduate training abroad, graduate studentships and post-doctoral fellowships, scholarships, etc. A professor with whom you have built a healthy relation may be your trusted resource in becoming aware of such opportunities [2]. As a research student, your collaboration with your supervisor may extend several years beyond your training under his supervision – it is therefore advisable to nurture and develop this relationship for your gain. Remember that wherever you want to end up after your programme of study, whether you go for further studies or a job, your supervisor's report on your conduct, abilities, and potential for further growth has an appreciable impact on your fate. You should hence make a conscious and cautious effort to build the relationship with your supervisors.

3.1.3 What does your supervisor expect from you?

So what actually do supervisors expect from their students? How do they want you to approach them? And how do you interact with them? Answers to these questions and more are outlined in the following guidelines;

- i. **Be on time.** Whether you are going to the lab, class, or conference, make sure your report on time. Do not forget that a lot of planning goes into research – research is time-specific and time-bound. You must therefore be time-conscious to reap the best out of your training. Supervisors dislike it when their students create tardy impressions.
- ii. **Be courteous.** You may sometimes disagree with your supervisor's position on some topics under discussion. This is acceptable because you are not obliged to always side with your advisor. And identifying opposing perspectives is also a demonstration that "you are thinking." The best research findings sometimes emanate from disagreements. However, the most important thing here is that you articulate your views in a friendly, non-hostile manner, without making derogatory remarks about your supervisor or any other member of the research group. Senior researchers appreciate trainees who argue their cases in a calm, respectful manner [2].
- iii. **Attend classes regularly.** Research students are sometimes required to undertake some top-up courses in their gray areas. When you find yourself in such a situation, make sure you do not just attend classes, but do so punctually and regularly. You know that it takes a great deal of effort for a professor to prepare for a class, right? You can thus imagine how disheartening it will be for a professor to realise that students are not interested in coming to class. Showing up in the class is a demonstration of your seriousness in the subject matter. Again, for your professor to recommend that you undertake a particular course suggests that you require a deeper level of knowledge and understanding in that field for undertaking your assigned research project. You therefore have to take it serious.
- iv. **Provide feedback on time.** You would like your supervisor to know you for the good reasons, right? Well, you should know by now that providing late feedback on your research project will surely not help your case. As a typical characteristic of the research process, it requires repetition of experiments, appropriate fine-tuning and changing of methodologies whenever acceptable results are not obtained. As a student, you are required to provide prompt feedback on your experimental results to your superiors, especially when the experiments are not working out. This ensures that your supervisor and/or your assigned post-doc are allowed enough time to try to figure out what might be wrong and fix it.
- v. **Make time to discuss innovative ideas.** Professors love students who think out of the box – those who "see" beyond their assigned research projects, and seek to make meaningful impacts to their fields of specialisation. As you think about your assigned research project in a broader context, you may come

out with some potential groundbreaking ideas that may help solve some of the world's troubles. You should discuss such ideas with your supervisors, no matter how little or unrealistic the idea may appear. They will be in a good position to help you develop such ideas further. But whilst you do this, be cautious of intellectual property issues – there have been reports of students battling their superior for “stealing” their innovative ideas. First of all, make sure you trust your supervisor to discuss any confidential information with him/her. You may first choose to discuss the idea in its generality, and later bring in the specifics, as long as you trust your boss.

3.2 Working with lab mates

Another set of people whom you are required to collaborate with are the post-docs, and colleague students (both senior and junior) in your group. These people are very vital in ensuring your success in the research training. As more experienced colleagues, post-doctoral fellows provide students with the needed day-to-day guidance in their research projects, thus reducing the pressure on the supervising professors. Your colleague student lab mates are also key in the understanding, planning, execution, delivery, and presentation of your research work. They can assist you in; undertaking “difficult” protocols (if they have conducted such experiments before), data analysis and interpretation, how to use “strange” lab equipment, etc. Moreover, your colleague students have a marked effect on your social life in the lab – they are your immediate “family and friends” in the research environment [5], [6]. Remember that they are all people with diverse backgrounds brought together by the common goal of further education. Whilst there is the likelihood that you will find colleagues with whom you easily connect, you may also find people who are “more difficult” to get along with. But to get the best out of your research training, you should be at peace with them all. Your ability to collaborate and relate well with your lab mates will create a pleasant environment for research.

3.3 Keeping in touch with technical and administrative staff

The lab assistant, the technician, the IT expert, the administrative secretary, librarian and other library staff, and all other personnel in similar positions are another useful group of people in the smooth running of your programme of study and your success in the research career. Although they may be usually forgotten, they are the “behind the scene” sort of characters who power your eventual success [2]. You should get to know these people during your institutional, departmental, and/or lab orientation. Make sure you keep in touch with them – you shall surely turn to them in times of need. Accord them the same kind of respect and courtesy you give to your professors. They may not hold the daunting titles of “Professor,” “Doctor,” or “Emeritus” but they are accomplished in their own ways. Demonstrate courtesy and open-mindedness whenever you meet them [2]. The technical and administrative staff are more important to your success than you might realise. The lab technician ensures the smooth running of your research lab; the lab assistant is usually experienced in the experiments conducted in your lab and the operation of equipments required to complete the protocols; the IT expert is responsible for maintaining the efficiency of all IT equipment without which

your studies may be in jeopardy; the administrative secretary ensures that your progress in the programme of study is accurately captured and reported to the appropriate office (e.g. the academic registrar's office); the library staff knows where to get that book you need for your research, and on and on. Ensure that you accord everyone the respect that they deserve.

3.4 What a character!

Yes, you have been trying to get along with all the people that matter in your research training. But there are a few people who appear to be making life unbearable for you, right? Well, there is one thing you should know – not everyone makes a good friend or colleague. Some people will not behave as you would like them to, no matter how welcoming you are to them [2]. They will put you down, make you feel inferior and unworthy. These are the people who are more difficult to get along with. Accept that not everyone will be that cordial towards you. Do not think “too hard” about them. Do not concentrate on their reactions towards you – maintain a cautious relationship with them, making sure you do not step on their toes. Rather, channel your efforts towards what it takes to be successful in your career. So while you seek to be at peace with all people, admit that diversities exist.

4 Dealing with the ups and downs in life as a research student

Life is full of both good and bad times. This is true in the research student's life, just as it is in all aspects of life. The experienced scientists will tell you that research can be frustrating at times – it does not always go according to your laid-out plans. As a senior professor once said, a particular experiment may be conducted a hundred times before getting it right. So what happens to the ninety nine times that you had it wrong? It is all part of the learning process – to get better at what you are doing [7]. Although it may be hard for you as a beginning scientist to accept and cope with the hard times of research – coupled with the stress and anxiety they present, be assured that it is normal to go through turbulent times where your experiments are just not working out. These are the rigours of life as a graduate research student that you should learn to get used to [6]. When the pressure begins to mount so high or when issues get rough, you will need to step back – get out of the scene and return refreshed. You may choose to go to the gym, see a movie, organise a party [6], go for sightseeing, or visit friends in a different city. You will also need moral support and encouragement from your colleagues – your lab mates, post docs, older colleagues in research, roommates, other students in your institution of study, or new people you meet and get along with as friends. Discussing your problems with such people can go a long way to help in getting them resolved. They might have been through such grueling times before and can therefore provide you with advices in solving them. This is one other reason why you need to build your social network with colleagues very effectively. Your success as a research student is not only tied to the four corners of your research lab – so remember to have fun and build networks with others.

5 CONCLUSION

No one is an island. You must therefore learn to deal with the people around you – those who matter, directly or indirectly, in your professional growth and success as a research scientist. You may naturally fit in with some of them, but others may be harder to get along with. Yet, you should make a conscious effort to build, maintain and manage your relationship and collaboration with all people in order to enhance your career growth in the biomedical research career.

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